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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001386

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, DRL, DRL/IRF

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: CHRISTIAN PASTORS RECOUNT  
INCIDENTS OF HARASSMENT

Ref: Colombo 1379, and previous

(U) Classified by Charge' d'Affaires James F. Entwistle.  
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: During an August 12 visit by the political intern and FSN specialist to Christian churches in the Colombo region, local pastors expressed anxiety over recent attacks and threats they and their congregations have faced, especially in the wake of an outspoken Buddhist monk's death in December. In many of the areas visited, Christian clergy felt the police were of very little help, if any, and support from within the community had declined due to fear. They also conveyed concern regarding the proposed religious anti-conversion bill in parliament. Many interlocutors feared that if the bill is passed, the harassment will not only intensify, but also be legally sanctioned. END SUMMARY.

#### Church Leaders Describe Harassment

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2. (C) On August 12, political intern visited five Christian churches and groups in Colombo and its outskirts. A majority of the country's churches are in the Colombo area. Most of the pastors the political intern spoke with operated churches with congregations of about 100-200 people. Many of these small churches, such as the Christian Fellowship Church in Talpitya, were former residences where the pastor's family lived either above or adjacent to the place of worship. (An Evangelical church visited by the political intern in a rural area of the south also had a similar structure.) In contrast, the People's Church in Nawala, with a congregation of about 5,000 and services in three languages, had a more traditional setup. The churches visited on August 12 represented several denominations: Evangelical, Assembly of God, and Pentecostal.

3. (C) Most of the churches visited had been subject to attacks, particularly within the last 12 months, by what pastors termed "local mobs." The various clergymen described the attackers as organized gangs of local men, numbering anywhere from 30 to 250. The religious leaders charged that the attackers had assaulted them and their families both verbally and physically, sometimes using objects such as petrol bombs and stones. While most of the clergymen were not severely wounded, some sustained injuries that did require minor hospitalization. All of the organized attacks appeared to have been instigated, if not led, by local Buddhist monks who claimed the pastors were responsible for unethical conversions, these Christian interlocutors felt.

4. (C) In speaking with the political intern, Godfrey Yogarajah of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) stated that there have been 43 attacks on Christian churches this year. (Note: NCEASL claimed 91 attacks in 2003.) Mr. Yogarajah traced the roots of the problem back to a 1991 presidential commission investigating non-governmental organization (NGO) activities in Sri Lanka. The commission classified churches, such as Assembly of God, and Christian organizations, such as World Vision, under the NGO category. Yogarajah said that during the commission's hearings, citizens were allowed to bring numerous allegations against NGOs. Yogarajah said that many of these allegations, which received prominent media coverage, were unfounded. In addition, he felt that the whole episode fostered public animosity against Christians and the Western world, with the December 2003 death from natural causes of Venerable Soma Thero, a Buddhist monk who had been especially outspoken and inflammatory about the issue of Christian conversions, providing a pretext for Buddhist extremists to act on this growing antagonism. Pastor Ayesha of the Assembly of God Church in Jayala, who was attacked prior to Soma Thero's death in December 2003, also tracked the beginning of tensions between Christians and Buddhists to the NGO commission.

5. (C) Several other clergymen stated that their churches had not witnessed any problems in their

communities prior to the death of Venerable Soma Thero in mid-December 2003. In many of the areas visited, the Christian pastors said the police were of little help, if any, and what limited support existed within these Buddhist communities had declined due to fear of reprisals from other Buddhists. Several pastors also alleged that specific monks in the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party had been responsible for instigating, and sometimes leading, attacks against them.

#### Specific Incidents

16. (C) Rev. Sunil Hewage, pastor of the Christian Fellowship Church [Assembly of God] in Talpitya, relayed that for six years his church had maintained an amicable relationship with the village until the passing away of Ven. Soma Thero in late December. In the days following the monk's death, however, a mob of about 250 people, led by three local monks, came in the night to attack the pastor's church and home. A similar confrontation occurred in April 2004 around Easter. After the December 2003 incident, the pastor stopped regular services. During another episode in June 2004, local villagers ordered informal prayer meetings to cease. According to Hewage, limited police action was taken in all of the incidents, and several of the Buddhist monks in charge of these attacks were arrested although they were subsequently released on bail. Six villagers were also arrested. Court cases against two of the monks and the six villagers are underway. Although the police are currently providing around-the-clock protection for the pastor and his family, Hewage highlighted the increasing financial burden posed by court fees and decreased church revenue.

17. (C) Pastor Chrisso Handy, a well-known Evangelical pastor at People's Church in Colombo, stated that his church had not received any direct threats, though several of his fellow pastors had been intimidated by local gangs. He reported that before Ven. Soma Thero's death, he had enjoyed a fairly cordial rapport with the surrounding Buddhist community. Since this event, however, relations have been strained. In his opinion, initial intimidation of churches often emanates from the local Buddhist temple or those connected to it, but the final assault usually does not. Pastor Handy blamed the growing animosity on what he described as the monks' increased alienation and aloofness from their own congregations which, he said, prompts the dissatisfied to look to the church, and not the temple, for financial and emotional support.

18. (C) There have been incidents of church attacks throughout the country. In rural areas, where local monks have more influence in the community, problems are more widespread. In most cases, intimidation of the Christian community has been initiated through the local Buddhist temples, with monks arranging protests and rallies to rouse the local Buddhist community, according to local interlocutors. Although pastors are the main targets of harassment, lay Christians in these predominantly Buddhist areas are undergoing hardship as well, as many of them are prohibited by both local officials and other residents from running their businesses.

#### Christian Clergy on Religious Anti-Conversion Bill

19. (C) Pastor Handy believes that the proposed anti-conversion bill is "built on a fallacy" of forced conversions. There is no evidence of forced conversions, he contended, adding that he personally finds unethical conversions to be "repulsive." Moreover, although he has repeatedly urged local Buddhist monks to come to him with reports of such unethical conversions so appropriate action can be taken, the monks have never presented any cases. He expressed concern that if the anti-conversion bill passes, the police may interpret its restrictions broadly and use the law to justify abuse against Christians. Godfrey Yogarajah, like Handy, said that he has met with JHU officials multiple times, urging them to help form an inter-religious council or conduct a joint investigation of incidents of alleged unethical conversion; however, the political group has not been responsive. He also feared the passage of the anti-conversion bill, stating that its vague definitions of words such as "force" and "fraudulent" granted vast discretionary power in its implementation.

10. (C) COMMENT: Although attacks on Christian churches have diminished in frequency in recent months, many in the Christian community with whom we met say they still live in fear and feel unable to practice

their faith openly. While the violence has subsided, if an anti-conversion bill passes, attacks could well escalate once more. Leading government officials have publicly spoken out against church attacks, but the local Christian community has felt that support or intervention on its behalf by the government and police has been inconsistent. Although the August 17 decision by the Supreme Court has dimmed the prospects for the anti-conversion bill's passage (see Reftel), anxiety among the Christian community runs high. At a time when the country is trying to recover from years of ethnic violence, this further division of communities within Sri Lanka can only impede the healing process. END COMMENT.

ENTWISTLE